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ABSTRACT

Many state certification recommendations in reading education do not clearly define "certification." This produces a number of questions, among them the following: (1) Do reading teachers who are likely to teach reading at either the secondary or elementary level need a developmental course at both levels? (2) Should there be discrete courses in "diagnostic" and "instructional" techniques? (3) Are courses in gifted and talented education and in learning disabilities education necessary for reading teachers? (4) Do reading teachers need a discrete course on measurement and evaluation, or should the essential principles be taught within the context of the developmental and remedial courses? (5) Is it sensible to require practicum experience at both elementary and secondary levels? (6) Who decides that a practicum experience has been successful? (7) Should the successful completion of a practicum experience be the key requirement for certification? and (8) How can success be demonstrated? Recommendations for reading specialist certification raise similar issues. It is time for the reading profession to take a leadership role in deciding what certification should entail. (HOD)

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# Less Than Words Can Say About The Certification of Reading Teachers

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

About the time that proposals for the 1983 American Reading Forum program were due, I was participating in discussions of proposals for the revision of the Wisconsin certification requirements for reading teachers and reading specialists. In fact, being not only a member of a faculty group involved in the training of reading teachers and specialists but also a member of the Department of Public Instruction's Advisory Committee on Certification in reading education, I was participating in more discussions than any sensible person should. I began to wonder whether there was -- or whether there should be -- more to "certification" than merely listing and, subsequently, checking off courses. And then, in a transcendental leap, I began to ponder the imponderable: What exactly is implied by "certification"?

At the same time I was reading an amusing but exasperating book titled Less Than Words Can Say, by Richard Mitchell (1979), The Underground Grammarian. In the book Mitchell counts the ways that our lives are comm icated, confused, and, alas, controlled by words that are used without precision or thought. He argues -- to paraphrase the dust jacket -- that the schools fail to foster clear language and thought because they teach kids to socialize rather than to read, write and cipher. And he concludes that, lacking "the power of language" the illiterate products of the schools can't manage their lives because they can't think.

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It took less than a transcendental leap -- more of an incidental shuffle -- for me to see that certification rules are composed, edited and published in a way that is a fine demonstration of what happens when words are let run amok.

Pondering the Imponderable

Mitchell offers some thoughtful and precise words about certification when he wonders what it would take to provide all the third graders in America with teachers who are correct and precise in their spelling and punctuation:

> The simplest and most drastic way to achieve that result would be to give all the third-grade teachers a test and send away into the Peace Corps in Afghanistan any who can't spell and punctuate. Could we do this? Certainly not. Someone will show that the test is culturally biased against those in whose background there can be shown a distaste for spelling, which is, after all, nothing more than a genteel skill prized mostly among idle ladies of the privileged classes, like painting on velvet. The testing of teachers is not encouraged by teachers' organizations. It is their view, anyway, that a teacher's competence is demonstrated by the granting of a certificate" (p. 204).

And then he goes on to argue that nobody seems to know precisely what it is that certificates are granted <u>for</u>.

The certifiers, the argument goes, are in cahoots with the teacher trainers: ". . . the certifiers certify, whomsoever the teacher-training academies put forth as certifiable" (p. 205). And the teacher-training academies, of course, put forth as certifiable whomsoever they damned well please. Not that we academicians put it so crudely. We offer assurances in terms of excellence, professionalism, skill-mastery

and desirable outcomes. But the inescapable outcome is that we put forth as certifiable whomsoever we deem to have met the certification requirements. That, in an ever ascending spiral of circular reason, is whomsoever we damned well please.

How nice it would be to dismiss Mitchell as a goofy grammarian who knows not whereof he speaks. But who among us can deny the awful accuracy of his case? Pondering the impenderable puts us on a circular track that takes us nowhere. The certifiers certify whomsoever the academicians deem certifiable; the academicians deem certifiable whomsoever meets the certifiers requirements. To be brief, whomsoever is certifiable is certifiable.

Sounds too cynical you say? Perhaps. But remember that I got on this topic because I had suffered more discussions of certification than a sensible, sensitive person should. What exactly is implied by "certification"? Not much, it appears. What should be? Now that's a matter far beyond the scope of this paper. Careful consideration would be a worthy theme for an entire American Reading Forum conference!

Meanwhile, though, I will try to identify a few issues related to certification in reading education.

Less Than Words Can Say

After many months of deliberations, the Department of Public Instruction's Advisory Committee on reading certification -- of which, I've confessed, I was a member -- submitted recommendations. I'll share them with you, not as a model for anything or anybody but as an example of what happens when a committee puts together certification recommen-

dations that are designed to satisfy everybody. (People who are already certified, people who aspire to be certified; the Department of Public Instruction; more than a dozen teacher training academies, each with a different definition of reading, different expectations of reading teachers, different views of what teacher education is all about, and very different personnel and budgetary resources; the school boards; the teacher's unions; the school administrators; and the Legislature. I could also mention parents and students, but the fact is that they got scant attention compared to all the others.)

Two "levels" of certification were recommended: reading teacher and reading specialist. I'm not sure why; but I think it was because the committee was reluctant to recommend anything very different from the certification rules that were already in force.

The committee's recommendation for the READING TEACHER certificate follows:

> Reading Teacher. Effective July 1, 1972, any person who has a specific assignment to teach reading must hold a Reading Teacher license. Effective July 1, 1983, a regular K-12 license may be issued to an applicant who receives the institutional endorsement for the Reading Teacher license and has completed or possesses:
> a. Eligibility to hold a Wisconsin license to teach or completion of an approved teacher education program.
> b. Two years of classroom teaching experience.
> c. A minimum of 18 semester credits aggregated from the following courses, of which a minimum of 12 semester credits must be taken beyond the bachelor's degree, and each of which must carry no less than 2 semester credits:
>  1. Developmental reading in the elementary school;
>  2. Developmental reading in the secondary school;
>  3. Diagnostic and instructional techniques for readers with special needs;
>  4. Practicum teaching children with special reading needs including experience at both elementary and secondary levels;

5. Learning disabilities;
6. One course selected from:
   a) Gifted and Talented education
   b) Evaluation and measurement
   c) Literature for children or adolescents.

Issues aside for the moment, notice some of the words. The first sentence says ". . . any person who has a specific assignment to teach reading . . ." The interpretation is that if your principal assigns you specifically to teach reading, or to teach a reading "course", you gotta be certified. Presumably, if the principal tells you specifically to teach something else and only incidentally to teach reading, no certificate is needed. At least not a reading certificate. Point b says "Two years of classroom teaching experience." That's interpreted to mean experience teaching class-size groups of ordinary elementary school kids or class-size groups of ordinary high school kids in specific content classes. Experience teaching a few kids with learning problems, language problems, behavior problems or whatever probably wouldn't do; on the other hand, it might. Don't ask me why. Less than words can say.

Notice the odd wording where it says ". . . 18 semester credits aggregated from the following. . ." I suggested those words! The reason was that the committee wanted to say that (a) a course in each of the areas listed is required, (b) it's okay for the training institution to say whether each course carries two, three or four credits, but (c) each course must carry at least two credits, (d) some undergraduate credits can count toward the certification requirement, but not more than six credits, and (e) a minimum of 18 credits, of which

at least 12 must be taken beyond the bachelor's degree, is required. The reason the committee wanted to say all that was because we represented a variety of interest groups, and we were all trying to protect something. I suppose you won't be surprised to learn that the wording -- inspired though it was -- failed. When the Department of Public Instruction issued its version of those words, they went like this:

> A minimum of 24 semester credits, with a minimum of 12 of these credits taken beyond the bachelor's degree including at least 2 semester credits in each of the following:
> a) Developmental reading in the elementary school
> b) Developmental reading in the secondary school
> c) Diagnostic techniques for readers with special needs
> d) Instructional techniques for readers with special needs
> e) Practicum in reading at both elementary and secondary levels
> f) Language development
> g) Learning disabilities
> h) Gifted and talented education
> i) Evaluation and measurement
> j) Literature for children or adolescents.

The words are similar, but now they say something very different; flexibility and local options are gone. One message is clear: The one the Department is sending to the advisory committee.

Oh yes . . . we were going to talk about issues. Buried under all those words there are some. (1) Is it important for a reading teacher, who is likely to teach reading at either the secondary or the elementary level, to have a developmental course at both levels? (2) Should there be discrete courses in "diagnostic" and in "instructional" techques, as the Department's version demands? Or is it better to demonstrate the integration of diagnosis and instruction in the context of

a single course? (3) Is a course in gifted and talented education a defensible required course for reading teachers? Is a course in learning disabilities? (4) Should reading teachers have a discrete course on measurement and evaluation, or should the essential principles be taught within the context of the developmental and remedial courses? (5) Is it sensible to require practicum experience at both the elementary and the secondary level? Are the training institutions able to adequately supervise two practica for each student? Should they be? Is there really any difference? Should there be?

But of course most of those issues are specific to the Wisconsin requirements. They don't even address deeper, more important matters. Like, Who decides that a practicum experience has been successful? How? Or, more basic, Should the successful completion of a practicum experience be the key requirement for certification? If so, How can/should "success" be demonstrated? If not, What then? Should there be temporary or provisional certification, with validation required periodically by demonstration of successful teaching? If so, What demonstrates "successful" teaching? Who decides? How often?

Specific or basic, the "issues" are almost never addressed either by the certifying agency or by the teacher training academies. We're all too busy with political matters, most of them too mundane even to be called "issues". The Department wants to keep its public happy. And the training institutions, it seems, want to keep on doing whatever it is they have always done.

At the risk of belaboring the point, these are the advisory committee's recommendations for the READING SPECIALIST certificate:

> Reading Specialist. Effective July 1, 1972, any person who works with reading teachers, classroom teachers, and others as a resource teacher to improve competency and interest in the teaching of reading to implement Sec. 118.015, and to prevent reading disabilities must hold a reading specialist license. Effective July 1, 1983, a regular K-12 license may be issued to an applicant who has the institutional endorsement for the reading specialist license, and has completed or possesses:
> a. Eligibility to hold a Wisconsin reading teacher license.
> b. A master's degree with a major emphasis in reading or at least a 30 semester credit program equivalent to the master's degree.
> c. A minimum of 15 graduate semester credits aggregated from the following courses each of which must carry no less than 2 semester credits:
>  1) Guiding and directing the K-12 reading program;
>  2) Field experience in reading program development, implementation, and evaluations;
>  3) Research related to reading;
>  4) Supervision of instruction;
>  5) Content area reading for the reading specialist.

Again, notice the words. Point b, about the master's degree or thirty credits, is directed solely at concerns of the training institutions. It has nothing whatever to do with legitimate certification concerns. The advisory committee tried to drop the master's degree option as irrelevant, but the Department was beset by protests from certified reading specialists who claimed that their own degrees would be "cheapened" if that were done. I'm not sure, but I think what they really meant was that somehow the degree requirement was tied in with salary schedules and job security. I am sure that the uproar had nothing whatever to do with training, competence and successful teaching.

The committee used the words in point c.5, "Content area reading for the reading specialist," to make it clear that the intent was not merely to have the reading specialists take another secondary read-

ing course but to have them take a course dealing explicitly with content area reading at a sophisticated level. Whatever that means. We put the content area requirement in in the first place to pacify the committee members who seem to believe that there is content-area and content-free reading. I'm not sure why we don't need a special course in content-free reading.

Less Than Words Can Say

The Department came back with its own version of the advisory committee's recommendation:

> PI 3.07(7)(a)3. 317 Reading Specialist. Any person who directs K-12 reading program, works with reading teachers, classroom teachers, administrators, and others as a resource teacher must hold a reading specialist license.
> a. Effective July 1, 1983, a regular K-12 license shall be issued to an applicant who has the institutional endorsement for the reading specialist license, and has completed or possesses:
> 1) Eligibility to hold a Wisconsin reading teacher license.
> 2) Three years of successful experience as a regular classroom teacher.
> 3) A master's degree with a major emphasis in reading or a 30 semester credit program equivalent to the master's degree including minimum of 18 graduate semester credits in the following areas with at least 2 semester credits in each:
> a) Guiding and directing the K-12 reading program
> b) Field experience in K-12 reading programs
> c) Research related to reading
> d) Supervision of instruction
> e) Content area reading for the reading specialist
> f) School administration.

Notice that now <u>three</u> years of "regular classroom" teaching experience is required. Two years were enough for a mere reading teacher; but three, never mind whether it was successful, are required of reading specialists. And the experience must all be in the "regular classroom."

The teacher who taught third grade two years and then became a reading teacher and taught "reading" for one or more years is out of luck. Back to the "regular" classroom for him/her before a specialist license can be issued.

Notice, too, that the Department threw in a course in "school administration". Two credits seem about right for the topic; but I'm not so sure that the requirement is sensible for a reading specialist. Unless, of course, the reading specialist is presumed to be a lacky of the administration. Then knowing some of the tricks might be worthwhile.

But, enough. I continue to overmake my point. I'll end with a simple plea: Let's try to give at least as much thought to the certification of reading teachers as we give to other things that are important to us. Like getting promoted, or earning tenure. And, as professionals in reading education, let's take a leadership role in deciding what certification should entail. Like the American Medical Association, or the American Bar Association, or even the American Psychological Association.

Do I really think it's important? More than words can say.